

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

Today, 21st January, the Church remembers one of the most venerated martyrs from the ancient Roman Church. Agnes was a thirteen-year-old child and she was martyred in the year 304. She came from a prosperous Roman Christian family. At that time, many young Christians desired to commit their whole lives to Christ and that meant forsaking marriage and remaining pure. It was also a time when the Church was facing persecution under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. It was said that Agnes was very beautiful as well as coming from a wealthy family. She attracted many potential suitors but she firmly resisted them. To punish her she was reported to the Roman authorities as an atheist – as someone who had forsaken the traditional Roman gods. She resolutely refused to deny her faith in Christ or to submit to the lustful desires of the men who tried to seduce her. She was stripped and paraded through the streets of Rome, was tried and convicted. Attempts to burn her failed and so she was beheaded. After her death, the Church venerated her as a martyr who had kept her purity and refused to deny her Lord.

The seasons of Christmas and Epiphany remind us that God in Christ comes to us in grace rather than in judgment, in gift rather than in demand, in humility rather than in terrifying power. Christianity is a positive, hopeful, life-giving and life-enhancing Faith.

But it is not long before we encounter harsh realities. In the Gospel we meet the cruel tyrant Herod and the brutal slaughter of the holy innocents, the infant boys of Bethlehem; the fleeing of the holy Family for sanctuary in the land of Egypt, and the prophecy of Simeon at Candlemass that a sword of sorrow will pierce the heart of St Mary. It is as if the Cross is already being superimposed upon the Crib.

Indeed, the ancient Fathers of the Church saw Jesus' circumcision on the eighth day of his life as a fore-shadowing of a much greater shedding of his blood. His Presentation in the Temple on the 40th day when the sacrifice of two doves or pigeons was made, as pointing forward to the ultimate Sacrifice of the Cross. His early training in carpentry from his guardian St Joseph as a sign of his ultimate working in wood when nailed to the Tree. His baptism in the River Jordan as his first 'yes' to the Cross, his vocation to take on himself the sins of the world.

The martyrs, including St Agnes, follow closely in his steps. And the martyrdom of a child is particularly moving. One of the tragedies on the New Year's Day fire in Switzerland, the war in Gaza, and the massacres in Iran and Sudan are the number of children and teenagers whose lives have been taken away.

In the mystery of underserved suffering we seek an Epiphany, a disclosure, a super-imposing of God-in-a-manger and God-on-a-Cross.

As the Church holds today in its collective memory a young life, a pure life, a wasted life, we perhaps glimpse hope for the many because of the One Life, given at Christmas, given at Calvary, to redeem all lives. As in this sacrament of faith we behold again a disclosure of the love of God, a love which redeems suffering, a love that overcomes all death, the love of God that we see in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord.